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ABSTRACT

Program reviews provide department chairs and faculty with vital information about the need for their program, changes that can improve the program's viability, and needs for resource allocation. In addition, well-designed reviews will determine program effectiveness and lead to improvements in program quality. In recent years, the role of program review has become increasingly important due to demands of external constituencies, diminishing resources, and new strategic management techniques. While every college is unique and must develop its own program review techniques, research shows that successful reviews assess the quality of program results, compare program objectives to results, provide information for revising program goals and content, and are formally approved by faculty. An ideal model for program review, which could be adapted by different institutions, should include the following four steps: (1) clarify program goals and objectives to establish purposes and identify goals in terms of measurable objectives; (2) describe the program by describing such program inputs as requirements, faculty credentials, and institutional resources; (3) assess program outcomes based on objectives; and (4) state future plans for the program. Finally, it is critical that deans and department chairs play a leadership role in program review to ensure support among faculty. (BCY)

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CHAIRS' AND DEANS' COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:

MEASURING DEPARTMENTAL EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH PROGRAM REVIEW

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Biographical Sketch

Gail Mee is the Associate Dean of Instruction for Mathematics and Science at Mesa Community College in Mesa, Arizona, the largest college in the Maricopa Community College District. Prior to assuming her current position in 1992, Gail was the Director of Institutional Research and Planning at Orange County Community College in Middletown, New York, where she also served as a faculty member and chair of the Department of Mathematics.

Gail earned her bachelor's degree in mathematics from Ladycliff College and master's degree, also in mathematics, from the State University of New York at New Paltz. She recently completed her doctoral work in College Teaching and Academic Leadership at Columbia University.

Chairs' and Deans' Commitment to Continuous Improvement: Measuring Departmental Effectiveness Through Program Review

Case #1. The Technology Department of an urban community college in the Northeast is in trouble. Despite an apparent growth in the availability of technology-related jobs in the college's geographic area, enrollment in the technology program has declined precipitously in recent years. In contrast, overall enrollment at the college has been increasing. Growth in the number of part-time students, especially women and minorities, has been particularly strong.

In the past, the Technology Department has enjoyed a solid reputation, but now the future of the program is in doubt. Faculty in the department believe that their program continues to be current and appropriate for the needs of their students and local industry, but the administration has begun to question its viability. The department chair has been asked to devise a plan that will turn the department around.

Case #2. The chair of the Biology Department at a large community college has requested a significant amount of new laboratory equipment again this year. For the past two years, she has submitted similar requests but the department has been granted only minimal allocations. The equipment currently being used is outdated and in constant need of repair.

Enrollment in biology courses has grown significantly in recent years. Anecdotal information suggests that there is a growing interest in life science as a major among many students at the college. However, most people on campus, including members of the administration, believe that the department serves primarily as a resource for nursing and allied health programs. With changes happening rapidly in these fields, the administration has been reluctant to invest large amounts of money to support the biology program. Department faculty are becoming increasingly disenchanted with the chair because of her inability to garner support for their program.

These two cases are examples of fairly common tales told by faculty and chairs in departments across all disciplines. They illustrate the importance of program review. While the purpose of the review may be different in each of these cases, the outcome will be critical to the future of both programs. In the case of the technology program, a good review will provide the chair and program faculty with valuable information about the need for their program and about modifications that can improve its viability. In the case of the Biology Department, a good review can influence decisions regarding resource allocations for their program. In both cases, a well-designed review will determine program effectiveness and lead to improvement of program quality.

Why Program Review?

Every successful organization must continually determine if it is accomplishing its goals and it must continually improve upon its efforts to do so. This is the fundamental logic that underlies program review. According to Craven (1980, p. 434), "academic program review refers to the process of defining, collecting, and analyzing information about a program or noninstructional unit to arrive at a judgment about the continuation, modification, enhancement, or termination of the program or unit." Program review serves as a guide to the future of a program; it is a necessary component of any continuous improvement process.

In recent years, the role of program review has become increasingly important in American higher education. External constituencies are demanding accountability and difficult decisions must be made regarding the allocation of scarce resources. Heightened emphasis on assessment has focused attention on the need for the evaluation of programs. According to Conrad and Wilson (1985), the following factors have contributed to the expansion of program review in recent years:

- widespread interest in maintaining and improving the quality of higher learning, both from within and without the academy, in a period of diminishing resources available to higher education;
- new academic management techniques, such as strategic approaches to academic program planning and budgeting (Barak 1981, p. 214);
- severe financial strains on higher education caused by declining enrollments, inflation and recession, increased costs, and overall shrinking financial support (Dougherty 1981);
- external demands for institutional and programmatic accountability from taxpayers, legislators, student consumers, and other constituencies;
- demands from governing boards and campus administrators for more effective and efficient use of limited resources. (pp. 4-5)

The essential purpose of program review is to assess the quality of our programs in order to improve them. Faculty have always recognized the need for reasoned change to maintain or improve the quality of academic offerings; program review provides a structured approach to achieve that end. There are other reasons for program review. Conrad and Wilson (1985, p. 11) cite the following additional purposes: to meet state-level mandates for reviews; to demonstrate institutional responsiveness to constituencies, such as sponsoring denominations or community groups; to provide a foundation for allocating and reallocating resources; to provide information to decision makers considering

program discontinuance; and, in the case of two-year institutions, to respond to federal requirements for the evaluation of occupational programs.

A Model for Program Review

Just as there are many purposes for program review, there are also many models that can be successfully employed. Since all instructional programs are different and exist in decidedly different college environments, there is no one model that can be adopted for the review of all programs. There are, however, common elements in all successful program reviews. Larson (1985, p. 106) found that successful models: (1) assess the quality of program results; (2) compare program objectives with program results; (3) provide information for revision of program goals and/or content, planning and budgeting, and the reallocation of resources to oversubscribed programs; and (4) are formally approved by the faculty.

The following proposal for a program review model incorporates the elements of successful reviews. It is intended to be an outline that can be adapted to the needs of unique programs and college environments and to satisfy different purposes. The model is divided into four steps:

1. Clarify program goals and objectives. This step establishes a clear statement of the purposes of the program. Program goals are identified and then stated in terms of measurable objectives. For example, if a program goal is to develop basic skills, the specific skills and measurable levels of achievement must be identified.
2. Describe the program. This component typically includes a description of program inputs: requirements, faculty credentials, and department resources. A description of program offerings, however, is not a substitute for answers to questions about program impact. Therefore, the focus of this step should be placed on descriptions related to program goals and objectives, i.e. specific course requirements related to intended program outcomes.
3. Assess program outcomes. This is the heart of program review. The purpose of this step is to collect and analyze useful information about the outcomes of the program. If program objectives have been carefully stated, outcome measures should lead to a determination of how well those objectives are being met. Emphasis should be placed on quantitative and qualitative data that are vital to assessing program results.
4. State plans for the program. The paramount reason for program review is to determine the future of the program. A worthwhile and valid review will result in recommendations and plans for the program.

Implications for Chairs and Deans

Despite research that supports the legitimacy of program review, it is often viewed with suspicion (Gentemann, Fletcher, and Potter, 1994, p. 32). Faculty often view it as a bureaucratic process with little or no significance to them. At best, it is seen as a possible opportunity to acquire additional resources; at worst, it is seen as a threat to discontinue a program.

In fact, program review, when done well, can provide the means to dramatically improve our programs and their impact on our students. To do this, it is critical that chairs and deans play a leadership role in the review of their own programs. They must include faculty, students, and others associated with the program in the process.

Program review focuses on just two fundamental questions: 1) What does the program intend to accomplish, and 2) what is it actually accomplishing? The reason for answering these questions is to determine the effectiveness of the program, and to identify areas of the program where improvement is possible. Who should answer these questions about a program other than those responsible for it?

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